

The reimagination of work

PITTSFIELD — Soaring temperatures, vacations, beaches, swimming pools, and outdoor barbecues mark summertime. Here are some fun facts about the dog days of summer:

- Watermelon is summer's most popular vegetable. It is part of the cucumber, pumpkin, and squash family. The average American eats 15 pounds of watermelon a year and these juicy favorites are 92 percent water.

- July is National Ice Cream Month. More Americans buy ice cream in July than any other month.

- August is the busiest month for travel and tourism, which employs more than 8,000 people in the Berkshires.

These fun summer facts have nothing to do with the workforce, but we could all use some light-hearted fun. These past few years have been challenging: long lines, short tempers, delays, cancellations, grief, overworked, overwhelmed and short-staffed. It's easy to understand why people are short-tempered and angry.

However, the road to recovery will be a long one, and the best workforce advice that I would give right now is to be kind and respectful. At home, at the workplace, and in the community. Just be kind and more patient as everyone is trying their best to grasp the changes over the past few years.

The U.S. jobs report in July had many analysts and policymakers once again asking whether the nation is at full employment. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported in June that the U.S. unemployment rate was 3.6 percent, with notable job gains in professional and business services, leisure and hospitality, and health care.

The overall labor force participation rate decreased from 63.7 percent in 2012 to 61.6 percent this year. There are 1.8 jobs available for every job seeker. In Berkshire County, the unemployment rate in June was 4.1 percent with 60,277 residents in the labor force and 2,450 unemployed.

To the average person on Main Street,



Heather Boulger

Inside the Job Market

the idea of full employment usually implies everyone in the country is working. However, even in a fully employed, robust economy, there will always be a certain number of people who have given up looking for work, who are between jobs or whose skills are temporarily not needed. It does mean that job seekers can be more selective with their job search, and that if employees are not happy at their current

employer, they may jump to other opportunities. It also means that it is difficult to find candidates and is forcing employers to rethink their approach to hiring.

Companies everywhere, in every industry, are concerned about labor short-ages, but we are at a historically low unemployment rate. We keep hearing "no one wants to work anymore" from local recruiters. According to a report from Ankura, a consulting group based in Washington D.C., the labor participation rate has been declining for 20 years and the pandemic just heightened the impact.

But they claim it's a demographic issue with not enough people entering the workforce to replace those who are leaving. Birth rates are down, marriage rates are lower, people are retiring early, the opioid crisis has impacted the workforce, and more young people are living at home without an urgency to work.

I'm not an economist, but there are 2,000 less people in the Berkshire labor force than in 2020, with the majority of those in the age 55-and-over category indicating that many baby boomers opted for early retirement. Even among those who have jobs, people are rethinking their options. Front-line workers, like medical staff, mental health workers, and educators are reporting high levels of burnout, causing some to seek a new career path.

The last two years have transformed the working world, causing many organizations to reimagine and redefine new norms and workforce strategies. Executives are revisiting their workspace and their working models. With a growth

mindset and an emphasis on learning, it's possible to make the most of this opportunity to rethink the future.

As part of our recent local Berkshire recruiting efforts to help companies fill their job openings, MassHire convened with 750 companies over the past year to identify their recruitment and retention needs and strategies. The results found that "a low number of applicants" was the biggest problem when it comes to filling open jobs.

Findings showed that 78 percent of HR professionals have experienced difficulty recruiting candidates for full-time positions, compared to 50 percent reported three years ago. Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics supports these findings because the unemployment rate has been decreasing, the number of job openings has been increasing, creating huge talent shortages for companies in many different fields.

Here's the silver lining. The pandemic has provided an inflection point for business leaders to consider how to cultivate employee creativity, productivity and satisfaction. Some have introduced "wellness days" to help employees work through their mental and physical health; some companies are revisiting their benefit packages; some companies are hosting staff outings (and ice cream socials), while others are implementing more staff development and training.

These gestures have generated real appreciation by employees, and by trying new things, we are continuously learning what works and what doesn't when it comes to giving people more autonomy over their professional lives.

Tight labor market has forced employers to offer training, reach out to new populations of workers, and accept applications from workers they might not have before considered which ultimately is expanding and up-skilling the labor pool as a whole as a result. Including those who were formerly incarcerated, younger workers, refugee and immigrant workers, and retirees who want to come back to work. Some companies are providing on-site education and accommodations like flexible schedules too.

The road to recovery will be a long one, and the best workforce advice that I would give right now is to be kind and respectful. At home, at the workplace, and in the community. Just be kind and more patient as everyone is trying their best to grasp the changes over the past few years.

The Berkshire MassHire system has many training options to help employers, job seekers, youth and career changers with their needs. Employers can post their job opportunities at no cost and participate in both in-person and virtual job fairs and matching programs to find workers. Job seekers, career changers and youth can access a variety of no-cost training programs in health care, manufacturing, technology, CDL licensure, and many more to gain the skills necessary for reemployment. Youth can access a variety of year-round programs to gain work readiness skills and obtain their first job.

The overall expectation is for hiring to pick up as the economy continues to recover. This big reimagination — for companies and workers — is going to take some time to sort out, but may lead to some wonderful new opportunities. It's more important than ever to be positive, patient and pro-active.

Visit us at MassHireBerkshireCC.com to help find your next opportunity. And definitely enjoy some watermelon and ice cream this summer. Now, let's get to work.

Heather Boulger is the executive director of the MassHire Berkshire Workforce Board in Pittsfield.